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ABSTRACT

Noting that speech communication educators have developed a unique interpretation of the nature and role of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication--that it is essential in enhancing interpersonal relations and in bringing about improved mental adjustment--this paper contends that such an approach to communication overemphasizes the self-disclosure role. It argues that there is insufficient evidence to support the belief that the goals of better mental adjustment and improved interpersonal relationships will be realized by a majority of the consumers of the approach. (Author/FL)

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Self-Disclosure in Speech Communication Pedagogy: A Case Against Overemphasis

Larry R. Judd

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A topic of discussion and a recommended activity in many interpersonal communication courses and texts, self-disclosure is often discussed in the context of an ecclectic, unique approach to communication which is derived from humanistic psychology and reflects the influence of growth group activities. Adaptation of the approach to the classroom has generated controversy. Some suggest that the courses are glorifying a fad which demands acceptance of its value judgments,[1] or are engaged in "the conduct of a sort of therapy,"[2] or are exploring the ways in which humanistic and growth group ideas may be used in educational settings.[3] While differences exist, there are enough similarities to speak of a humanistic approach to interpersonal communication which involves special applications of selected humanistic views and can be identified by the value placed on self-disclosure and on the characteristic of disclosiveness.[4] This approach is unique. It: extends beyond the therapeutic models of Rogers[5] and Jourard;[6] omits the cardinal theological elements of Buber;[7] selectively incorporates ideas from Cooley,[8] Mead,[9] Maslow,[10] and others; and differs from growth groups. While therapeutic communication among non-professionals is one aspect of humanistic interpersonal communication, it is more comprehensively described in terms of friendship relationships and as such finds application outside the therapist-client relationship. Humanistic

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interpersonal communication prescribes principles for use by "healthy"--not diagnosed as psychologically ill--students to apply in their everyday lives. Treated as an act and a skill, self-disclosure "refers to an individual's explicitly communicating to one or more others some personal information that he believes these others would be unlikely to acquire, unless he himself discloses it. Morever, this information must be personally private."[11] Most often, communication authors discuss self-disclosure in terms of a dialogic, one-to-one, relationship rather than a one-to-group relationship. Friendship, positive regard and supportive responses are emphasized. While genuiness is encouraged, the elements of interpersonal conflict and confrontation characteristic of growth groups[12] are not discussed in depth and are implicitly discouraged.[13] Despite some indications that self-disclosure might be viewed as a goal in itself, and despite Johannesen's suggestion that in the dialogic relationship a speaker "is not interested in bolstering his ego or self-image,"[14] the dominant position is that self-disclosure and disclosiveness are instrumental in goal achievement. The goals are improved interpersonal relationships and improved mental adjustment which is described by such terms as self-knowledge or self-acceptance, or self-actualization.

Philosophically, I am inclined to support the humanistic approach. But, I believe there is a danger that overemphasis on self-disclosure and disclosiveness may lead to the imposition of values under the guise of theory which is ostensibly supported by empirical research. As Miller and Steinberg point out, "judging from comments by numerous students in our classes and from the contents of recent books on interpersonal

behavior, self-disclosure has apparently achieved good word status in our society, while its antonym, self-concealment, has become a devil word."[15] Given the current state of empirical knowledge, the imposition of values and the prescription of specific modes of interaction appears to be an inappropriate posture for teachers who claim that the validity of what they teach is derived from or at least is supported by the results of empirical research. The thesis of this paper is that the unique approach developed in the field of interpersonal communication overemphasizes the roles of self-disclosure and disclosiveness, and that there is insufficient evidence to support the belief that the goals of better mental adjustment and improved interpersonal relationships will be realized by a majority of the consumers of the approach. The arguments supporting the thesis are organized under the areas of mental adjustment and interpersonal relationships.

Mental Adjustment

The consumers of the humanistic approach to interpersonal communication can hardly avoid arriving at the conclusion that the more self-disclosure and disclosiveness, the better the psychological adjustment. A sample of quotations illustrates the point. "The meaning of a person's existence is found in the community of person to person. An individual cannot become a whole self except through dialogue with another."[16] "As we see it, personal growth involves self-disclosure in words and actions...."[17] "Throughout recorded time there has existed a struggle between the self-actualizers and the nondisclosers. We now know the

non-self-actualizers as persons who tend to hide their thoughts and ideas, people who wear masks and distort reality. In severe cases they actually achieve cognative separation from reality--they become sick.... As we write this book we feel we are on the side of those who try to find reality through self-disclosure plus feedback from honest people."[18]

In a context where self-disclosure and disclosiveness are valued, "healthy" students are encouraged to feel that they really are not quite "healthy" and are induced to seek health by taking the cure of disclosing more. In addition, teachers are encouraged to teach and stress the skill of self-disclosure. Granted that authors caution that each self-disclosure should take place only under appropriate conditions, the essence of the message conveyed in that there is a sort of linear relationship between mental adjustment and disclosiveness. On one end of the relationship too little disclosure is related to poor adjustment and on the other end increasing disclosure is related to increasing adjustment.

The validity of the relationship is open to question. Many of the studies which are interpreted as supportive of the validity were conducted in therapeutic or growth group situations and the applicability of their results to the classroom or to everyday interpersonal communication is problematic. As Pearce et al indicate, "despite the considerable bulk of literature about self-disclosure, little reliable information is available about factors related to disclosure between friends."[19] Further, the interpretation and validity of measures of self-disclosure and disclosiveness has been seriously questioned.[20] There is some clinical support for the relationship on the low end of

the continuum. Among others, Jourard indicates that clinical experience suggests that chronic concealment leads to a breakdown. Whether the lack of disclosiveness is a cause of illness or a concurrent condition is not known. Jourard suggested that there should be large scale research to investigate the concealment-breakdown syndrome and stated that "no difinitive studies have yet confirmed this hypothesis."[21] Confirmation of the hypothesis had apparently not been accomplished in 1974 when Goodstein and Reinecker reported that "unfortunately our review of the literature provides little clear cut evidence that too little self-disclosure does produce maladjustment."[22] For the average consumer of the humanistic view, the reasonably "healthy" student, the more important part of the disclosure continuum is the middle and upper end--the idea that more disclosure leads to being even more healthy. Here, the questionalbe validity of applying therapeutic research to normal subjects is apparent. Maklin and Rossiter report that "despite the many references in the literature to the communication of psychologically healthy persons, we could find no empirical investigation of the relationship of everyday communication to mental health."[23] Others who have reviewed the literature indicate that the relationship between disclosure and mental health or adjustment is inconclusive[24] or has little or weak support.[25] And, while some studies show a relationship and others show no relationship, the strength of the relationships which have been reported is generally low, "no correlation has been higher than .50 and most are much lower."[26] Even if self-esteem or self-concept is used as an index of mental health, the relationship to self-disclosure

is complex and not necessarily linear.[27] Further, on the upper end of the continuum, there is the possibility that too much disclosure might be unhealthy. Jourard suggested a curvilinear relationship, "too much or too little self-disclosure betokens disturbance in self, and in interpersonal relationships."[28] Indeed, Culbert questions the desirability of too much self-disclosure[29] and Laing indicates that "the loss of the experience of an area of unqualified privacy, by its transformation into the quasi-public realm is often one of the decisive changes associated with the process of going mad."[30]

Thus, there may be and there may not be a valid relationship between mental adjustment and self-disclosure or disclosiveness. Until further research produces more information, the strength and nature of the relationship is open to question. Possibly, a strong linear or curvilinear relationship will not be determined. If one accepts the humanist view that people realize their own individuality as they achieve growth, then each individual might be expected to demonstrate more idiosyncratic behavior and personality as growth occurs. In any event, students may need to be apprised of the tenuous nature of the purported relationship. And, teachers of interpersonal communication may choose to reduce their emphasis on self-disclosure as a skill to be learned. Actually, it may be inappropriate to presume that the student does not already posses the skill. If the student is relatively "healthy" and if self-disclosure is really necessary for "health," then he or she must have done it not too long ago. I have yet to read a report of research involving normal subjects which reported that one of them had been unable to self-disclose.

In addition, the type of student who voluntarily selects an activity type class is more likely to be of relatively higher self-esteem and lower communication apprehension than the student who displays the opposite characteristics and who would thus be the most likely candidate to need to learn how to self-disclose.[31] Finally, attempts to increase student disclosiveness should be moderated by knowledge of how disclosive the student is and by some reasonable estimate of how much disclosure is "healthy" for that individual. As Jung put it, "the task of the doctor consists in treating the sick person, not an abstract illness."[32]

Interpersonal Relationships

Where the teacher and textbook emphasize and value self-disclosure and disclosiveness, the student may easily come to believe that self-disclosure is: a necessary ingredient in relationship formation and maintenance; a correlate or cause of increasing trust and attraction; a function of relationship development; and a necessary characteristic of good relationships. In short, you should disclose more to create, enhance, maintain and improve relationships. The following quotations illustrate the point. "Perhaps the main reason why self-disclosure is important is that it is necessary if a meaningful relationship is to be established between two people. Without self-disclosure meaningful relationships seem impossible to develop."[33] "Without self-disclosure you cannot form a close personal relationship with another person. A relationship between two individuals develops as the two become more open about themselves and more self-disclosing. If you cannot reveal yourself, you cannot become close to others and you cannot be valued

by others for who you are."[34] "Self-disclosure is a basic function of the degree of involvement between two people; there is a considerable body of research showing that when self-disclosure is high, interpersonal involvement is increased."[35] "If a relationship is to be improved, self-disclosure on your part is essential."[36] "Obviously, dialogue is highly desirable for communication while monologue is to be avoided, for it can destroy rather than create rich human experiences."[37]

Of course, there are cautions about when, where, and to whom one should disclose, but the main message to the student is that more disclosure is better; the open person is more interpersonally competent. One thrust of this line of thought concerns creating and enhancing relationships, and the other concerns the quality of relationships.

Does increased self-disclosure lead to the creation and improvement of relationships? Are disclosive individuals more interpersonally competent? Simple, reliable answers to these questions are not readily available. Self-disclosure is apparently involved in the development of some relationships but the nature of this involvement is confounded by: (1) the complexity of the disclosure construct, (2) the characteristics of the situation and participants, (3) the operation of other variables, and (4) the dangers of inappropriate disclosures to the relationship and individual. Self-disclosure is an act which has a number of identifiable aspects.[38] For example, the intimacy level, the positive or negative valence, and the content of the disclosure may influence the effect of a given disclosure on a relationship. Indeed, even determining how much disclosure occured is difficult. Goodstein

et al found that the most self-revealing statements were made by individuals who were self-ranked and group-ranked as low in self-disclosure.[39] These complexities are magnified by the influence of the characteristics of the individuals involved and the situation. As Bradac, Hoseman and Tardy indicate, "there is evidence that persons in our culture make rather fine discriminations between levels of intimacy of personal communication topics and that the perceived appropriateness of such levels varies with stage of relationship development, sex, age, and educational level, as well as the nature of the disclosure target (parent vs. friend, etc.)."[40] Thus, self-disclosure may be expected to demonstrate a complex, rather than simple relationship with relationship development and with relevant variables. Trust appears to be moderately related to some dimensions of self-disclosure in specific situations.[41] But, rather than self-disclosure precipitating attraction, affection and liking, these variables may preceed disclosure or may exhibit irregular relationships with it. Pearce and Sharp have questioned the ubiquity and significance of the relationship of affection and disclosure.[42] And, negative relationships between high disclosure and attraction have been found.[43] Liking appears to influence the selection of the partner in disclosure[44] and preceed rather than follow it. As Jourard points out, "when one loves or likes one's parents, one will make oneself known to them; not otherwise."[45] Further, individuals are attracted by different things and one surely runs a risk if the valued receiver perceives some aspects of the discloser as bad. Maslow says that "if the partner is profoundly bad rather than good, increasing familiarity will produce not increasing preference but increasing antagonism and revulsion."[46] As Pearce et al

indicate, "affection and self-disclosing communication are generally cited as significant factors--as causes, effects, or correlates--in interpersonal relationships in which self-disclosure occurs. However, almost any hypothesized directional relationship finds some support in the research."[47]

The model of relationship development which characterizes self-disclosure increasing as the relationship develops has some support in the literature.[48] However, the model appears to be too simple. Gilbert and Whiteneck indicate that "in spite of the increased number of research studies addressed to the topic of self-disclosure, there have been relatively few strides made in ascertaining the complex effects of this phenomenon on the outcome of relatiosnhip development."[49] The prediction that intimacy is a function of self-disclosure may be misleading.[50] Relationships may not develop along linear lines[51] but may become more idiosyncratic as they develop.[52] The kind of you tell me and I'll tell you reciprocity observed in initial interactions may become unnecessary as a relationship develops and more variable patterns of exchange may prevail.[53] Such variability seems relatively consistent with a humanist approach. As the individuality of the partners is revealed they might well establish unique interaction systems depending on the nature of the partners, the relationship, and the stage of relationship development.

Thus, self-disclosure appears to be related in some way to trust, attraction, liking and relationship development. But, the relationship appears to be complex rather than linear and complicated by the various dimensions of self-disclosure, the individuality of the participants

and relationship, and the situation. I believe that the tentative nature of these relationships should lead teachers to be cautious in working with self-disclosure in the classroom. Even though most books warn the student that self-disclosure is risky, the balance of pressures in the classroom may be unnecessarily weighted in the direction of disregarding the risk. What is the real choice of a student when the teacher and text value self-disclosure, when self-disclosure is taught as a necessary skill, and when implicitly or explicitly the student is urged to take the risk? Some people do overdisclose or disclose the wrong things[54] and suffer the consequences of betrayal.[55] I suggest that teachers should carefully consider the nature of the environment they create and should be cautious to avoid overemphasis of propositions that prescribe a model of interaction which at best has only limited empirical support. Apparently, we do not yet have an adequate view of what consitutes effectiveness in social communication.[56] And, the trait model, which underlies the belief that openess or disclosiveness is desirable, lacks empirical support.[57] Anderson has a point when he states that "students may have the right to be with teachers who avoid assuming that self-disclosure, for example, is such a universal positive that he or she should work to change the quiet student."[58]

Another problem with emphasis on self-disclosure is that students are encouraged to accept a sort of tunnel vision of the nature of desirable relationships. Placing high value on open, disclosive relationships has the tendency to lead the student to believe that any other kind of relationship is inferior. Such a prescriptive view ignores

the potential, and perhaps the reality, that relationships serve a variety of goals and may be desirable across differing interaction styles, partners and situations. As Raush et al indicate, "to place a demand for a particular style of communication on all couples is an imposition of values."[59] The expectation that partners should develop an interaction pattern of increasing disclosure ignores the individuality of the participants and the relationship. As Duck points out, "there is a danger in the assumption that all relationships are qualitatively similar."[60] There is reason to believe that there are different types of relationships and variability of perceived expressive communication across the types.[61] Further, "the research evidence on the specific patterns of communication and interaction between relational partners and their experienced adjustment is less than clear cut."[62] A review of contextual literature leads to the conclusion that individuals behave differently in different contexts[63] and they are probably idiosyncratic in determining the quality of their various relationships. For example, Borchner indicates that "it seems that each family sets its own standards for deciding what makes the family a 'good' or 'happy' one and judges its own behavior accordingly."[64] Rather than leading students to believe that "good" relationships are disclosive relationships, teachers may be better advised to follow Morton, Alexander, and Altman's advise to "leave behind all the rhetoric involving what relationships 'should be' to obtain viability."[65]

Conclusion

This paper has focused on self-disclosure and should not be viewed as a comprehensive review of or condemnation of all humanistic approaches to interpersonal communication. Rather, the paper is an attempt to present arguments which may prevent educators from overemphasizing the virtues of one aspect of humanistic communication and from demanding the acceptance of specific value judgments. The arguments constitute a reaction to an approach to communication which may encourage students to seek adjustment when they may already be adjusted and which may encourage a tunnel vision of the appropriate types of interaction and of the preferred qualities of relationships. In a society dominated by science and during the ascendence of accountability and basics over relevance, those who pay for education desire empirical support for what is taught and tangible evidence of results. There is good reason to doubt that the purported benefits of disclosure and disclosiveness will be realized by students in their real world interactions. Unfortunately, we have yet to develop a clear understanding of how self-disclosure is related to mental adjustment, how it affects relationships, and how much is enough.

Footnotes

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[3] Edward A. Mabry and Charles M. Rossiter, Jr., "Laboratory Training and Problem-Solving Groups: Distinctions and Relationships," Western Speech Communication, 39 (1975), 102-111.

[4] This approach has been described by Alan L. Sillars, "Expression and Control in Human Interaction: Perspective on Humanistic Psychology," Western Speech, 38 (1974), 269-277; John Poulakos, "The Components of Dialogue," Western Speech, 38 (1974), 199-212; and Richard L. Johannesen, "The Emerging Concept of Communication as Dialogue," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 57 (1971), 373-382. Current examples of textbooks using the approach are Kim Giffin and Bobby R. Patton, Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), and John J. Makay and Beverly A. Gaw, Personal and Interpersonal Communication (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1975).

[5] Carl Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

[6] Sidney M. Jourard, The Transparent Self (Princeton, New Jersey: Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 1964).

[7] Martin Buber, I and Thou, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribners, 1958. See pages 101, 123-24).

[8] Charles H. Cooley, Social Organization (New York: Charles Scribners, 1909).

[9] George H. Mead, Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

[10] Abraham H. Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being (Princeton, New Jersey: Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 1962).

[11] Samuel A. Culbert, The Interpersonal Process of Self-disclosure (New York: Renaissance, 1967), p. 2.

[12] The importance of challenging, confrontation, and conflict are discussed by Sidney M. Jourard, Personal Adjustment, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 342-346, and Gerard Egan, You and Me (Monteray, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1977), pp. 192-93, 211-23, 291.

[13] An exception to avoiding conflict may be found in Charles T. Brown and Paul W. Keller, Monologue to Dialogue (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 193-203.

[14] Johannesen, p. 375.

[15] Gerald R. Miller and Mark Steinberg, Between People (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1975), p. 309.

[16] Kim Giffin and Richard E. Barnes, Trusting Me, Trusting You (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1976), p. 28.

[17] Giffin and Patton, p. 214.

[18] Giffin and Patton, p. 215.

[19] W. Barnett Pearce, Stewart M. Sharp, Paul H. Wright, and Katherine M. Slama, "Affection and Reciprocity in Self-disclosing Communication," Human Communication Research, I (1974), 5.

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[21] Sidney M. Jourard, Self-Disclosure (New York: Wiley, 1971), p. 103.

[22] Goodstein and Reinecker, p. 72.

[23] Thomas J. Macklin and Charles M. Rossiter, "Interpersonal Communication and Self-Actualization," Communication Quarterly, 24 (1976), 46. See also Borchner's critique of situational influences on interpersonal behavior. Arthur P. Borchner, "Conceptual Frontiers in the Study of Communication in Families: An Introduction to the Literature," Human Communication Research, 2 (1976), 184.

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[31] James C. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension: A Summary of Recent Theory and Research," a paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Berlin, Germany, 1977; Judee K. Burgoon, "Teacher Strategies for Coping with Communication Apprehension," a paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, Texas, 1975.

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[34] David W. Johnson, Reaching Out (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), pp. 9-10.

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[45] Sidney M. Jourard, The Transparent Self, p. 14.

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[47] Pearce, Sharp, Wright, and Slama, p. 6.

[48] Pearce and Sharp, p. 421.

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[50] Steve Duck, "Interpersonal Communication in Developing Acquaintance," in Gerald R. Miller ed., Explorations in Interpersonal Communication (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1976), p. 145.

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